

FROM THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH—FLAX

Flax in any state of its processing from field to loom was eagerly bought up at every "vendue" or country sale. By acquiring it the purchaser placed himself that many steps nearer the eventual textile. If he had any cash on hand, he always willingly exchanged it for the partially processed fibre. In the eighteenth-century inventories of early farmers' estates, one can find such items as "ould Spining wheal and sum yearn," "clean flax," "44 pounds of flax, swingled."

If flax had undergone its complete transformation into fabric, emerging as "check linen," "flax linen" or "sacks and cloth for a Wagon Cloth" (one of the great white covers for a Conestoga wagon), it was snatched up. In the rural districts where almost everything essential was made at home, everyone was able to calculate the hours of labor required to produce an article. If that amount of time could be saved and used to work on something else of equal importance, the investment of money, scarce as it was, was made.

Processed flax was considered an article important enough to be given as a wedding present. In the mid-eighteenth century, a well-to-do farmer gave his daughter 100 acres of land and some of his best flax, so that she could spin her own cloth, a gesture both generous and moralistic in intent. For by his gift the Pennsylvania farmer assured himself that his daughter, though removed from parental supervision, would have no idle moments while waiting for her own flax crop to be sown and harvested. He "started her out right."

As the spinning of tow was a dusty, dirty job, it was the one tackled first, in order to get it out of the way. After that, the wheels began to hum as the finest linen yarn was made. Flax spinning, a much cleaner task, was made the excuse for an occasional party. Since opportunities to meet one's neighbors socially were infrequent, the spinning party was an ingenious device of women for getting together. Word was sent around to all the women in a community, and picking up their flax and their spinning wheels, they managed, either on foot or on horseback, to get to the central meeting point. Here they spent the entire day, gossiping and spinning with equal energy. In the evening, the young farmers arrived. The women, with an enormous amount of linen yarn to their credit, and refreshed by the gossip and by the lavish meal that their hostess provided for all, were ready to join the men in the barn for hours of games and dancing. These parties kept up until daybreak. Then the tired spinsters, single and married, together with their spinning wheels, were gathered up and taken by the young men to their homes.

Lacking the excuse of a party, a wily young girl, if she would shoulder her spinning wheel, might be permitted to use a chance hour to walk to a neighboring farm for a chat with her close friend. These rare hours were much sought after and the spinning was faithfully done by the well-disciplined maiden. Not to spin in one's free moments was considered a neglect of duty, and a subject for frank comment by one's neighbors.

Even after all this toil both in the home and at parties, the spun yarn was not yet ready for work on the loom. While tow was left its natural color, the finest linen yarn had yet to